



STATEMENT
of the
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
for the Record

U.S. House Veterans Affairs Committee

“Overcoming PTSD: Assessing VA’s Efforts to Promote Wellness and Healing”

Written Testimony Submitted by:

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Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Walz, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for affording NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the opportunity to submit written testimony on VA's current efforts to treat veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization, dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. NAMI has over 900 affiliates and more than 200,000 grassroots leaders and advocates across the United States—all committed to raising awareness and building a community of hope for all of those in need, including our men and women in uniform, veterans, and military families.

VA's current efforts on PTSD and mental wellness

NAMI applauds Secretary Shulkin's recent and ongoing efforts to enhance mental health services for veterans within the walls of VA and through Choice providers in the community. Among the many recent transformations the Secretary has instituted, there are three examples which NAMI would like to highlight, and believes will make a positive difference in the lives of veterans diagnosed with PTSD:

1. Establishing the reduction of veteran suicide as the Department's top clinical priority;
2. Offering urgent mental health care services to veterans with Other-than-Honorable discharges; and
3. Streamlining veteran medical records with the Defense Department for interoperability.

These are all positive steps to improving health services for veterans with PTSD and other service-related mental health conditions.

Peer Support

Peer support is an important treatment tool that promotes mental wellness, reduces the stigma of seeking care, and empowers veterans by improving coping skills and overall quality of life. Peer support is specifically beneficial to the veterans' community for addressing mental health conditions, principally PTSD. Peer support often serves as a bridge to receiving treatment and is a positive first step. Military cultural competency is key in establishing trust with a veteran when beginning treatment for a mental health condition, and peer support is often the best tool for this purpose.

It is critical to underscore that a peer support specialist is an important member of a clinical care team, which should also include an appropriate array of qualified health and mental health care professionals.

Employing Evidence-based Treatments

Research shows that cognitive behavioral therapies, such as Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) and Prolonged Exposure therapy (PE), are among the most effective evidence-based treatments for PTSD. Although VA currently recommends cognitive behavioral therapies as first-line treatments for PTSD, many VHA mental health providers have not been properly trained or do not administer them.

NAMI urges the Committee to consider exploring the option of mandating that each VHA mental health provider be trained and have the ability to administer at least one of these evidence-based therapies. Our nation's veterans deserve the best treatments available and VA should be leading the way in providing the top-notch mental health care that we know can make a significant clinical impact.

Treatment-resistant PTSD

NAMI remains concerned about veterans diagnosed with treatment-resistant PTSD and depression as first-line, conventional treatments do not make a positive clinical impact. While peer support, cognitive behavioral therapies and medication management are often effective in treating veterans with PTSD, VA must begin more intently researching and developing the clinical tools necessary to care for veterans with treatment-resistant PTSD and depression.

NAMI advises VA to work in coordination with the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) to develop a series of randomized clinically-controlled research trials on the effectiveness of innovative new approaches to these conditions including, but not limited to Ketamine treatments and Trans-Cranial Magnetic Stimulation therapy (TMS). The research trials should have safety protocols in place and be led by top-notch researchers who understand and value adhering to clinical safety guidelines.

While the research base for these treatments is currently underdeveloped and more conclusive research studies are necessary, it is incumbent upon VA to be a leader in pioneering the path forward to care for veterans with these conditions. Additionally, creating an evidence-base around these treatments could ultimately go a long way in meeting our shared goal in the reduction, and eventually elimination, of suicide among veterans.

Finally, it is NAMI's strong belief that in a time when science and innovation could be the key to unlocking many life-saving treatments for America's veterans living with mental health conditions, it is certainly not the time to cut any federal funding for medical research. We respectfully ask the Committee to broadly reject any cuts to funding for medical research and innovation where the Committee has jurisdiction.

As the Committee is aware, the signature wounds of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are invisible. In a culture that demands strength, it is often difficult to step forward and seek help for an injury, such as PTSD, that remains unseen. For this reason, there is a much larger barrier facing America's veterans in accessing necessary mental health care services. NAMI encourages the Committee to remain vigilant on these issues and keep matters concerning mental health care for our nation's veterans at the forefront of all key policy discussions.

NAMI is grateful to the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the entire Committee for its commitment to improving mental health services for our nation's veterans. NAMI is committed to working with Congress, Secretary Shulkin, and our Veterans Service Organization (VSO) partners in continuing to improve mental health services within VA and through Choice program providers—ensuring that veterans, too have a community of hope and realize that recovery is achievable.

Thank you for inviting NAMI to submit written testimony on this important topic; we always appreciate being a resource on mental health matters at VA and in the veterans' community overall.